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(dated) Aug 8, 1985

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(dated) _____

Accepted for the Oakland Neighborhood History Project

by Kathryn A. Hughes (Project Director) 10/10/85 (Dated)

West Oakland

OAKLAND NEIGHBORHOOD HISTORY PROJECT

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*incomplete text

West Oakland history - boundaries, ethnic groups, places

Interview with Elmer Schwartz
Date of Interview: 3 September 1981, Camron-Stanford House, Oakland
Interviewers: Pamela Morton, Kathryn Hughes
Transcriber: Janet Oman
Tape 1, Side 1

Elmer Schwartz's father came to Oakland from St. Louis, where he had been born in 1865. Elmer's maternal greatgrandparents had come from Scotland and settled in Forest Hill, a small town a few miles east of Auburn, where they started a hotel named Forest House. Elmer's grandmother was born in 1851, his mother in 1874.

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Schwartz: I was born and raised in West Oakland. My mother's folks had come from the mining country up in the Mother Lode about 1870. I was born in 1896 in the same house my mother had been born in. We lived down on Chester Street between 3rd and 5th. A few days after I graduated from Prescott Technical High in 1916, I took a job and I worked with the same company until my retirement in 1963. I started carrying newspapers just before the earthquake. My paper route was down as far as West Oakland went - at that time where 7th Street came to an end at Bay Street. The Southern Pacific tracks, coming down from Sacramento, ran around the edge of the Bay to the 16th Street Depot and down to the Oakland Mole. The tide there went out at least a quarter to a half mile making a large area of mud flats. You could draw a line from 16th Street Depot over to 20th and Adeline, and from there north over to the Emeryville line, and you would know that everything west of that was at that time part of the Bay. They didn't begin to fill in that land until somewhere around 1912-13-14 to make what they now call the Outer Harbor. Adeline was the only through street from 7th to San Pablo Avenue. When I was going to grammar school, Peralta Street was nothing

but a gravel road for horses and wagons. All the main streets going out to San Pablo were put in later.

Morton: You said you lived at 5th and Chester. Was that the house where your mother had been born? Did your parents build that house?

Schwartz: Yes, the lots there were very narrow - not more than 35 feet wide and 110 or 120 deep. No yards in between. The house was built around 1870.

Morton: Do you remember hearing from your parents what the neighborhood was like at that time?

Schwartz: It was Portugese, Italian, Irish. In a two-block area between 3rd and 7th there were 80 to 90 kids. There were large families, usually 10-12 kids to each house, and we had almost all of the Southern European nationalities. 70

Morton: Did they likewise build their own houses?

Schwartz: Half built, half rented. Many were mechanics brought in to work at the Southern Pacific repair shop, which was then below 3rd and Cedar Street.

Morton: Your house at 5th and Chester, then, was one of the earlier buildings in that area?

Schwartz: When I was a kid, there was scarcely one empty lot.

Morton: Were there people of different economic status? Were there people who lived in a much grander house?

Schwartz: For quite a number of years we were the only family who had a telephone. My mother's father needed the phone because he was on call 24 hours a day as a foreman for a group of laborers getting out supplies for the railroad company.

Morton: Are you saying your family was a little better off?

Morton: I think so. But of course there were other families there who were even better off than we were.

Morton: The reason I ask is that the De Fremerys (sp?) house is still down there. And the Ghiradellis.

Schwartz: Well, the Ghiradellis didn't come there until after the earthquake. But the De Fremerys were one of the early families there. And then, up at the corner of 7th or 8th and Center St., was the McDermotts. In the 1915 World's Fair over in San Francisco they had a duplicate of the McDermott steam engine. One of those engines is still around today up in Calistoga. The fellow up there used to take passengers around, but he had to give it up recently because of the price of fuel. I think somebody down in the Santa Cruz mountains bought it.

Hughes
~~Morton~~: I notice you have a railroad car on your tie. You have always been interested in trains?

Schwartz: Very much so. From the time I was born until I got out of there in 1923 when I was married, we heard the constant chug of switch engines 24 hours a day. The windows in our house would even rattle from the noise of the freight yard a block away. People who would come to visit us would say, "Don't that noise bother you?" And we'd say, "Well, we never hear it." It's just like wind....You know it's there, but if it stops, you wonder what happened.

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Morton: What's your earliest memory of a train?

Schwartz: We used to ride on the train practically every summer when my mother would take us children up to Forest Hill, riding on the train to Auburn and then taking a horse-drawn stage the rest of the way. We would wear linen dusters over our clothes. I still have one of those dusters at home. We used to leave Oakland Pier around 7:00 or 8:00 in the morning, and it would take us until dinner time to get to Forest Hill.

far as Melrose. In about 1910 or 11, the steam trains were replaced by red electric trains. Everybody along that line who commuted to San Francisco, like my father, would make the half-hour ride to the Ferry Building for 10¢. A monthly commute was only $3.00.

Morton: What happened on days when it was raining or the water was rough?

Schwartz: The weather had practically no effect on the ferry boats at all. I remember a couple of times I went over in the morning and it was so foggy you couldn't even hardly see the end of the ferry boat, but that didn't slow them down. They had signals that they lived up to. And they didn't have radio beacons in those days either.

Morton: What was your father doing in San Francisco?

Schwartz: He was a blacksmith, worked for what they called a carriage building shop.

Morton: Couldn't he have worked at one closer in Oakland?

Schwartz: People usually stayed with the people where they started. They didn't change jobs so much in those days.

Morton: Did your father consider that 10¢ a cheap fare to pay in those days?

Schwartz: Well, it was comparable. When he passed away in 1931, which was in the depth of the Depression, he was making only $45 a week. If he were working at the same job today, he'd be making a minimum of $10 an hour. I was figuring it out the other day: comparing my income when I first got an automobile, I was paying 20¢ a gallon for gasoline. And with what my income is today, I'm only paying 15¢ a gallon as compared to $1.50. Everything else is relevant (sic).

Morton: I was curious about your sense of neighborhood. Did you

identify with West Oakland, or with a few blocks? What was your sense of what your neighborhood was?

Schwartz: Yes and no. In those days people knew everybody in the neighborhood, not just a couple of neighbors on each side, but people all over the section. I carried papers in West Oakland, and the furthest down place was referred to as The Point. The train tracks that come along by 16th Street Depot and the Estuary that comes east and makes a point, and that's how it got its name, but that seems to have died out.

Morton: You mean that was the shape of the land?

Schwartz: (consulting a map) All of this land has been filled in.

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Reminisces about when he was in highschool and would go up to Shellmound Park in Emeryville for Sunday picnics and track meets at the beer garden. The track there where he would run the mile and half-mile was like the one at Edwards Field at Cal. Remembers with glee how the police always had an ambulance and patrol backed up to the gate. Whole area gone with the building of Freeway 80.

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Morton: How were the mud flats utilized? Did people swim? Were there any beaches along there?

Schwartz: No, you had to go out too far to swim. There was a sort of beach, but not the kind you'd care to go in. You could walk out, but you'd sink down into muck,- soft, gooey, oozy mud.

Morton: Were there clams or oysters?

Schwartz: Well, if there were clams, people didn't eat them.

Morton: So it wasn't a very pleasant waterfront then?

Schwartz: Not particularly. Kids used to pay around there, but as far as picnics were concerned, that was out. The Key Route Pier used to go out where 80 goes out to the Bridge now. I remember

even 25 or 30 years ago, from a sandspit down there I used to see sea lions. It was where those radio stations are, just about where the bridge starts.

Morton: Getting back to your own neighborhood, what did you consider The Point?

Schwartz: The Point referred to only 7th Street, maybe back 3-4 blocks in there. Maybe you heard of this fire that was down there?

Morton: I was there. I witnessed it.

Schwartz: That was at 7th and Chester. I knew those buildings. I haven't been down there for 15-20 years. I'm scared to go down there now.

Morton: Do you remember what buildings were there? They all seemed to be Victorians.

Schwartz: There was one building, originally in the center of the block, an old mansion-type house. As time progressed, they built these buildings around it on the street.

Morton: Gibbon's Folly?

Schwartz: I don't recall. No, Gibbons, that doesn't mean anything. As I recall it, on the northeast corner of 7th and Chester when I was a kid, there was a drugstore, a bakery, a butcher shop, a saloon, and then I think --let's see, it's hard to remember - and then this house set back in the middle of the block -- McDermott's old house. Of course, McDermott's house isn't there any more. They took it out sometime in the 50s and made it into a housing project. 405

A few years ago the Oakland Tribune put out a flier depicting a lot of old-time doings in Oakland, and we thought it was something to keep. We dug it out the other day and reminisced.

If you'd like to see it, I'll bring it down. Another thing: I used to collect streetcar transfers. Each line has its own name: West 8th, West 12th, Rhoads (sp?) Street, Telegraph, etc. Also, I'm a photographer, and I have slides of the "Chain of Lights" around the lake before they discontinued them. They're taken from a hill up here off of Lakeshore, looking down on the lake itself. Also I have pictures of sailboats on the lake. I once had copies made and gave them to somebody in your Park Department (a Mr. Cooie? - he's retired 4-5 years ago). I could dig out these pictures if you'd come up to my house.

Morton: Do you have any photographs of West Oakland?

Schwartz: No, I got out of there before I started photographing. But I do have photographs of the speedboat that used to take passengers from the Oakland airport across the Bay to the San Francisco airport. It would ride on top of the waves. I'll get these pictures together for when you come up to the house.

Morton: Great, because I want to ask you more questions - about Prescott School, your neighbors....

Schwartz: Famous people who've come from West Oakland that I have known of: the consultant to President Reagan, Edward Meese III. An uncle of his and I started grammar school at the same time. His name was Walter Meese, and I knew him until we graduated from highschool. Edward Meese's father today is the Edward Meese who used to be our county tax assessor or tax collector. I know him through the Lake... Breakfast Club of which I am a member.

Morton: How do you remember churches? People going to church together?

Schwartz: Well, it was 80% Catholic, about 10% Protestant; the rest, anything. Living with these people and having part of my family being Catholic -- we're all God's children, let's face it. A few ideas that are a little bit different, why, to me doesn't mean anything.

Morton: We're just interested whether all the groups - Portugese and Italians, for instance, worshipping at the same church?

Schwartz: There was a church in West Oakland -- we used to call it 550 Father McNally's Church, a Catholic church, about 9th and Peralta. It's St. Patrick's Church, but we called it Father Mc's. Father Mc, at one time, was considered very political in West Oakland. He controlled a lot of votes. He did a lot of good for his people, and what a lot of them would have done without him, I don't know. That church was considered more of the Irish Catholic. And then there was another church on Chestnut between 7th and 9th. I think it is still there -- St. Joseph's -- and that was mainly for Italians and Portugese. And then on the northeast corner of 8th and Chestnut was a Catholic school where working mothers brought little children to be cared for by the day.

Morton: Do you know where the mothers worked?

Schwartz: They worked all over.